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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: WHAT MAKES TOOMAS HENDRIK RUN?

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Former Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves is one of the front runners as we approach August's first round of elections for president, a job Ilves tells us he does not want. Openly disdainful of incumbent Arnold Ruutel, Ilves explained that he had to run because he could not stomach the prospect of five more years of Ruutel and his "kolkhoz manager mentality." Ilves expects the election to go to the Electoral College, where he believes he stands a 50/50 chance of winning. End Summary.

I DON'T WANT TO, BUT I HAVE TO  
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¶2. (SBU) In typically brassy fashion, former Foreign Minister and current presidential candidate Toomas Hendrik Ilves marched into his meeting with us and began by saying: "So, I guess you want to know why I want this job. Well, I don't want it." Ilves explained that twice before he has sacrificed a comfortable life to serve his country -- once when he gave up his position as head of RFE's Estonian Section to become Ambassador to Washington, and again when he agreed to become Foreign Minister. Ilves claimed to have no interest in committing himself to a life of near poverty for his country a third time, especially for a job that has as little power as that of Estonia's president.

¶3. (SBU) So, why is Ilves running? Simple. He disdains incumbent President Arnold Ruutel, saying that during Ruutel's tenure Estonia has effectively lacked a President. And, Ilves believes, he is the only person who has a chance of ousting Ruutel. He portrays a Ruutel-Ilves showdown as a battle between entrenched old regime-era figures with their "kolkhoz manager mentality" and eastward-orientation and Estonia's younger, westward-oriented generation.

HOW IT WILL PLAY OUT  
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¶4. (SBU) Ilves thinks he is the only candidate who stands a chance of uniting enough of Estonia's political establishment to beat Ruutel. This is not because the political elite particularly like him. It is, instead, because Ilves is the only potential candidate popular enough with the public to have a real chance of beating Ruutel.

¶5. (SBU) As Ilves sees it, the election will not be decided in the parliament, even though he claims to have the two-thirds support among deputies required for election. Since they know this, Ilves believes the leaders of the People's Union (Ruutel's old party) and the Center Party will not allow their deputies to participate in the secret ballot election. This will

leave Ilves three votes short of the required two-thirds and throw the election into the Electoral College, where the parliamentary deputies will be joined by a large number of local officials.

¶6. (SBU) Ilves shrugs off press reports that People's Union and Center are actively recruiting support among these local officials with promises of budgetary largesse. (Both parties are members of the governing coalition, whereas Ilves' Social Democratic Party is in opposition.) In the end, Ilves believes local officials with an eye to their own political futures will vote the way they think will be most popular back at home. He believes he holds the trump there given what he claims is his greater popularity even in rural areas where Ruutel is supposed to be strongest. (NOTE: Recent polls asking voter preferences in a Ruutel-Ilves contest show a jump in support for Ruutel since he announced he would run for re-election. This jump has eaten away most, but not all, of Ilves' lead in earlier polls.) Taking all this into account, Ilves believes he stands a 50/50 chance of winning in the Electoral College.

AND WHAT IF HE DOES?  
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¶7. (SBU) So what will Ilves do if he does wind up with this job he says he doesn't want? He does not intend to flout the constitutional limits on the president's role as he believes his patron, Lennart Meri, did. At home, he will use his bully pulpit to try to constrain the politicians he so clearly disdains such as Center's Edgar Savisaar and People's Union's Villu Reiljan. In foreign policy, he thinks he can fill an important void, serving as the voice for new EU entrants who want to push the EU in two important directions: towards more liberal economics -- he points out that his Estonian Social Democratic Party votes more liberally on economic issues than the German CDU -- and a more pro-U.S. foreign policy.

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